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Call, Encounter, and Response

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SUMMARY

Why, theologically speaking, do we *care*? Specifically, what grounds the ethical motivation and formation of service provision? Christian faith-based organizations have a responsibility to go beyond negative restrictions and legalistic frameworks to foster a culture of positive support. Which theological resources offer a compelling vision of ethical caregiving? To answer this question, this project draws upon diverse theological and philosophical sources and incorporates personal experience as a direct support professional (DSP) with a Christian faith-based service agency in Canada.

Four additional considerations help guide the inquiry. First, what premises and principles currently guide the moral posture of direct support? These may indicate challenges or opportunities. Second, what current conversations at the intersection of theology and disability might be informative? Third, what myths or barriers must be overcome to foster an ethical posture? Finally, what are the virtues or moral practices that exemplify a uniquely Christ-shaped vocation of care?

PART ONE explores the ethical “call.” *Chapter One* asks why the language of vocation surrounds direct support work. How might care providers experience work as a “calling,” whether from religious or secular perspectives? One may hear a call *from God*, and/or *to another*, carrying the weight of transcendent obligation. A calling may be received as onerous or freeing. Responsibility can exacerbate tensions and disillusionment within bureaucratic systems or free caregivers to embrace the meaningful aspects of their work without feeling overwhelmed and worn out. Looking to current research along with the writing of Martin Luther and Miroslav Volf, this chapter asks, “*What vocational posture avoids compassion fatigue and burnout while sustaining meaningful passion?*” It is determined that resilient ethical care requires balancing one’s sense of belonging with a healthy perspective or “distance” from one’s work.

Chapter Two seeks to understand vocation in relation to the human other. Building on the theme of transcendence, it contrasts Lutheran undertones of “neighbour-love” with love of neighbour as articulated by Søren Kierkegaard. How

might the ethical call be grounded not in natural preference, but in eternal equality before God? How does Christ's command to love one's neighbour as oneself compel people beyond existing comfort zones toward their brothers and sisters with intellectual disabilities?

Chapter Three contrasts theological approaches with ways in which contemporary service delivery models attempt to establish a basis for ethical conduct. *Professionalism* is the means by which developmental services seek not only to attract potential direct support staff, but also to form these workers into ethical service providers. Professionalism fails to offer the resources required to establish a moral foundation. The behaviours or "competencies" proposed by professionalism rely upon what Alasdair MacIntyre calls a moral fiction of management: *effectiveness*. Without a clear conception of the *good* or *goods* towards which direct support aspires, professionalism fails to provide adequate moral motivation or formation for direct support professionals – especially in times of transition and change.

PART TWO contrasts the moral framework of professional caregiving with the ethical resources of Christian theology. *How might we encounter one another as human beings created in God's image?*

Chapter Four sketches contemporary discussions on the *imago Dei* at the intersection of theology and disability. What are helpful ways of engaging this image? What ways might actually undermine the dignity of people with intellectual disabilities? Contemporary theologians along with insights from Emil Brunner and Søren Kierkegaard shape the priority of *relationality* in this *imago*. God is love, and so love must be the foundational principle whereby one may be created in God's image. Following Levinas, we encounter the trace of God in the face of our neighbour.

Chapters Five through Seven confront barriers to encountering one another as created in the divine image. The first barrier lies in the *myth of the transparent other*, addressed in *Chapter Five*. We fail to encounter the image of God in others when we project onto them our own account of who they are, particularly through the lens of

disability. In the theology of the incarnation, and Christ's command to love, we are opened to receive our neighbour in all of their beauty and mysterious complexity.

Chapter Six builds on the reflexive nature of our failure to encounter our neighbour as created in God's image. The *myth of the transparent self* suggests that this failure has more to do with the way in which I *give an account*, and expect others to do the same, than it does with the actual person whom I encounter. Narrative ethics places the weight of ethical responsibility upon the transparency of the accounts we give of our lives. This weight of intelligibility places people with intellectual disabilities at a significant disadvantage. Judith Butler points to the possibility of an ethics grounded not in our transparency to one another, but in our *shared opacity*. As relational beings, we depend upon one another in those moments we are unable to "give an account." This social selfhood is radically established in and through the divine image.

Chapter Seven emphasizes that it is the account we give of God that ultimately generates the myths of transparency of those created in God's image – ourselves and others. In glossing over the significance of profound mystery at the heart of the biblical account, we perpetuate *the myth of a transparent God*. To counter this myth, Chapter Seven recounts the Old Testament emphasis on God's hidden presence, appreciates the humility of theological approaches such as *via negativa* and theopoetics, and points to the mysterious revelation of Christ's love. This love is the catalyst for transformative care with people created in God's image.

The sublime opacity woven through stories of God, self, and others reveals that ethical responsibility is not based upon my neighbour's ability to become "transparent" to me through a coherent account. Instead, we receive a loving obligation rooted in our shared *hiddenness*. In the wellspring of the love of a relational God, One who is revealed in the suffering love of Christ on the cross, the Christian receives ethical motivation and formation towards her neighbours created in the divine image. One cannot give an adequate, transparent "account" of this love, of human beings, or of God. The task is to re-imagine virtues not on the basis of transparency myths but out of our shared opacity with others and ourselves.

PART THREE points toward the *response* called for in acknowledging the opacity of our accounts and our responsibility before God. While the intellect may assist in the process of moral deliberation, the weight of ethical responsibility lies prior to cognition in one's encounter with God and others. People with intellectual disabilities are, in this way, complete moral agents capable of full human flourishing. *Chapter Eight* outlines several *virtues of discovery* that are rooted in the gift of love. These virtues must be embodied in relation to the near-one, the neighbour. They do not rely upon excellent cognition but rest in profound love and appreciation for epistemic and embodied limitation. These virtues shape ethical care provision in Christian services, care that is not determined by a set of rules or learned theological precepts but discovered in a lifelong journey with God and others.

Chapter Nine ties up these themes in relation to the account of the author's own life and experience, concludes, and points to areas of future inquiry.

The mystery of the *imago Dei* opens space toward constitutive relationality even when one is unable to *give an account*. Vulnerability and interdependence are not only *aspects* of what it means to be human; they give rise to full human flourishing. In learning to rest in the divine love that establishes us, we discover a graceful way of being human together. This way carries the potential to not only ground the ethical framework of Christian service, but to heal interpersonal relationships and revive the diverse communities in which we live.